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ABSTRACT

This research brief highlights data from surveys of college administrators on the status of assessment policies and practices. The surveys addressed approaches to assessment, external mandates prompting assessment activity, skills or outcomes that are being assessed, assessment methods and procedures, and use of assessment results. The surveys found that about 80 percent of colleges report that they are conducting some form of student assessment. Fewer than 20 percent of large research universities assess growth in academic skills or personal development. Assessment mostly takes the form of measuring basic college-level skills and higher-order writing skills. For the future, colleges expect to give more attention to critical thinking, problem solving skills, and long-term outcomes. Colleges are using assessment results for curriculum planning and program evaluation more often than for reports to external constituencies. Implications of the survey findings are discussed. A table compares 1988 and 1990 responses to surveys on assessment. Contains 5 reference notes, 3 data resources, and 12 references. (JDD)

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CAMPUSES AND STUDENT ASSESSMENT

Holly Hexter and Joan K. Lippincott*

The call for accountability in higher education has been accompanied by pressure to produce evidence of educational effectiveness. Today, state boards, legislatures, and accrediting agencies, and colleges themselves are attempting to assess what students gain from their educational experience. Although assessment per se is not new, what is different today is the coordination and systematizing of such activities, as well as the use of the results—"to justify funding, to attract potential students, and to provide quality assurances to potential employers."¹ On some campuses, assessment is a term used to describe any type of evaluation including pre-enrollment standardized testing. However, the definition of assessment is evolving to connote measures of outcome, what students have learned, and effectiveness, how students' experiences match the goals of the institution.

For the last several years, ACE has monitored the status of assessment policies and practices through its annual survey, *Campus Trends*. ACE has asked college administrators to report on the areas of student learning being assessed, the methods and instruments used, and their views of the appropriate uses of assessment. In addition to looking at the findings of this publication, we here draw on two other recent assessment surveys, one of two-year institutions and one of research universities. This research brief highlights recent trends in assessment and identifies their policy implications.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Most colleges—eight out of ten—say they now are conducting some form of student assessment. At public institutions, assessment is occurring largely as a response to external mandates. At community colleges, standard management practice was also frequently cited as a reason for initiating assessment.
- Most assessment takes the form of measuring basic college-level skills such as English or mathematics and higher-order writing skills. At community colleges, data on academic progress and employment outcomes are the most prevalent forms of assessment information collected.
- For the future, colleges expect to give more attention to critical thinking, problem solving skills, and long-term outcomes.
- Fewer than 20% of large, research universities currently assess growth in academic skills (including critical thinking) or growth in personal development. Their assessment efforts focus on pre-admission testing for placement purposes.
- State requirements notwithstanding, colleges are making more frequent use of assessment results

for internal purposes i.e., curriculum planning and program evaluation than for reports to external constituencies.

- Despite a growing consensus on the usefulness of assessment for accreditation and self-study, college administrators remain fearful about possible misuses and inappropriate methods.

IMPLICATIONS

- Balancing external pressures for assessment with the specific internal needs of institutions will continue to create friction between higher education institutions and outside agencies.
- Federal regulations mandating accrediting bodies to seek outcomes information from campuses and a recent governors' report encouraging states to have public institutions define what students will learn and be held accountable for results will be further impetus for increased assessment.
- Colleges must be prepared to supply the resources that new or expanded assessment activity calls for.
- Within higher education institutions, administrators must work with faculty to develop meaningful assessment measures to help improve teaching and learning.

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THE CAMPUS PERSPECTIVE ON ASSESSMENT

Approaches

Campuses are taking a variety of approaches to assessing student learning; there is no clear consensus on what activities constitute assessment.

In their survey of large research universities, Ory and Parker reported that in 1988 the most common form of assessment was the administration of one-time, pre-admission, standardized tests for placement purposes.

Nevertheless, experts in assessment agree that measures of student outcomes should look at student growth over time, and that the change and development of students should be the focus of assessment efforts. However, even in two-year institutions there is little systematic follow-up of student learning outcomes. In a 1988 survey of members of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 15 percent or fewer institutions made entry-exit comparisons of students' skills in such areas as reading, writing, and mathematics.

Most commonly, current assessment efforts focus on individual programs or on particular aspects of student performance. For instance, many campuses have instituted senior-year projects and/or comprehensive exams to measure student learning in a particular field of study. But colleges are attempting also to assess skills and competencies, such as writing and critical thinking, that transcend individual courses or disciplines.

While individual faculty have been assessing student learning for many years, the new emphasis in assessment is on a coordinated, institution-wide program of measuring student outcomes relevant to the institution's goals. This approach is highlighted in a recent survey of two-year institutions which studied assessment in three areas: academic progress and employment outcomes; student learning outcomes; and student satisfaction outcomes. Respondents were asked how important each area should be for measuring overall institutional effectiveness.

Assessment methods and instruments vary by institution and according to what is being measured. Paper-and-pencil tests, whether in the form of locally developed or nationally standardized examinations, are used widely. Other assessment methods, such as portfolio evaluation or performance-based techniques, long used in some disciplines, are gaining wider acceptance. The following examples illustrate the scope and direction of campus programs.

- Alverno College has an extensive assessment program directed by faculty and aimed at individual student learning. Advisors assist students from the beginning of their programs to compile a portfolio of exemplary papers, projects, and videotaped performances, as well as the results of such other exercises as open-ended interviews and psychological personality inventories. These internal measures are supplemented by standardized instruments or professional evaluation.

- At the University of Tennessee, the focus of assessment efforts is program evaluation, and assessment is linked to performance funding—the state allocates funding on the basis of change in test scores and other data reported by the university.
- At Northeast Missouri State, assessment approaches evolved over time. Early efforts centered on the use of standardized tests to produce "value added" student outcomes, which demonstrate that the institution's programs improve students' knowledge and abilities. Now the university has adopted more qualitative methods and is seeking broader outcomes.²

Assessment Is Not a 'Flash in the Pan'

Survey findings confirm observers' opinions that, far from being either a flash in the pan or the concern of only those states with legislative mandates, assessment activity is flourishing on most of the nation's campuses.

- According to the 1990 *Campus Trends* survey, almost eight out of ten colleges and universities say they have assessment activities underway.
- Most campuses that have not already instituted procedures for assessing student learning are planning to do so: nearly eight out of ten institutions say they expect to introduce some form of assessment in the next few years.
- At two-year institutions, all three areas of assessment surveyed—academic and employment outcomes, student learning outcomes, and student satisfaction outcomes—are expected to increase in importance in the next three to five years.

Attitudes Toward Assessment

Attitudes toward assessment vary. The majority (albeit a slim one) of senior academic officers agree that assessment has the potential to "significantly improve undergraduate education." Administrators increasingly agree that some measures of effectiveness should be used as a condition of accreditation.

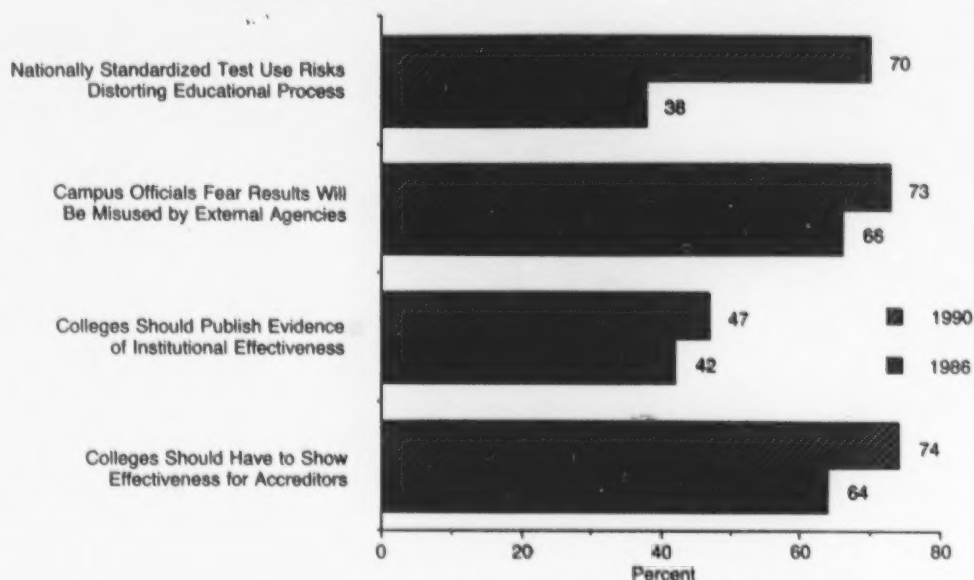
External Mandates

- Clearly, external mandates have prompted a significant portion of the recent assessment activity on campus. In 1989, administrators at two-fifths of all institutions—and one-half of public institutions—reported that assessment activities were "mainly a response to external mandates."

On the other hand, as assessment activities have proliferated, concern about the possible misuse of assessment results and inappropriate assessment methods has persisted (figure 1).

- In 1990, some 73 percent of respondents (roughly the same proportion as four years earlier) said campus officials feared that external agencies would misuse assessment results.

Figure 1
Administrator's Attitude Toward Assessment, 1986 and 1990



Source: American Council on Education, 1990

- There appears to be a growing consensus that standardized tests are inadequate for measuring student learning in a particular program or institution. In 1990, 70 percent of administrators, up from 38 percent in 1986, said the use of nationally standardized tests for purposes of student assessment "risks distorting the educational process."
- Despite these reservations on the part of administrators, survey results show that both the use of locally developed instruments and collaboration with other institutions regarding assessment activities are on the rise.
- Two-thirds of large, research universities stated that external mandates from accrediting agencies, state legislatures, and boards of regents were the driving force for new types of assessment activities on their campuses.
- More than half of all public institutions (53 percent of two-year institutions and 55 percent of four-year institutions) say there are state-required procedures.
- More than half of all institutions report that assessment practices have been incorporated in self-studies for regional accrediting agencies.
- While external factors such as state mandates and the requirements of accrediting boards were seen as important motivating factors at community colleges, the adoption of assessment techniques was also seen by many as initiated by standard management practice.

Nevertheless, as *Campus Trends* findings make clear, these mandates do not explain the array of assessment activities in place or in the planning stage at most

independent institutions. These institutions generally are exempted from state mandates, although they must meet similar accrediting criteria. Almost eight out of ten independent institutions have assessment activities underway, and more than two out of three expect some form of assessment to be introduced in the next few years.

What Skills Or Outcomes Are Being Assessed?

Most student assessment to date has focused on testing basic college-level skills such as English and mathematics, and measuring the attainment of higher-order writing skills. Less widespread are efforts to assess the results of a general education curriculum, to measure other higher-order skills, or to assess changes in student values and attitudes. A sizable minority, particularly among two-year colleges, rely on outcomes measures such as advancement to further education, completion of intended program or degree, job placement rates, and student satisfaction with faculty and curriculum.

Nevertheless, when asked about assessment activities currently being planned, college administrators say they are giving primary attention to assessments of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and of long-term (five- to fifteen-year) outcomes of graduates (figure 2).

- About two-thirds of institutions today say they are assessing students' basic college-level skills. However, this is not occurring across the board. Two-year colleges are more than twice as likely as doctoral-granting institutions (76 percent versus 32 percent) to have basic skills assessments in place.

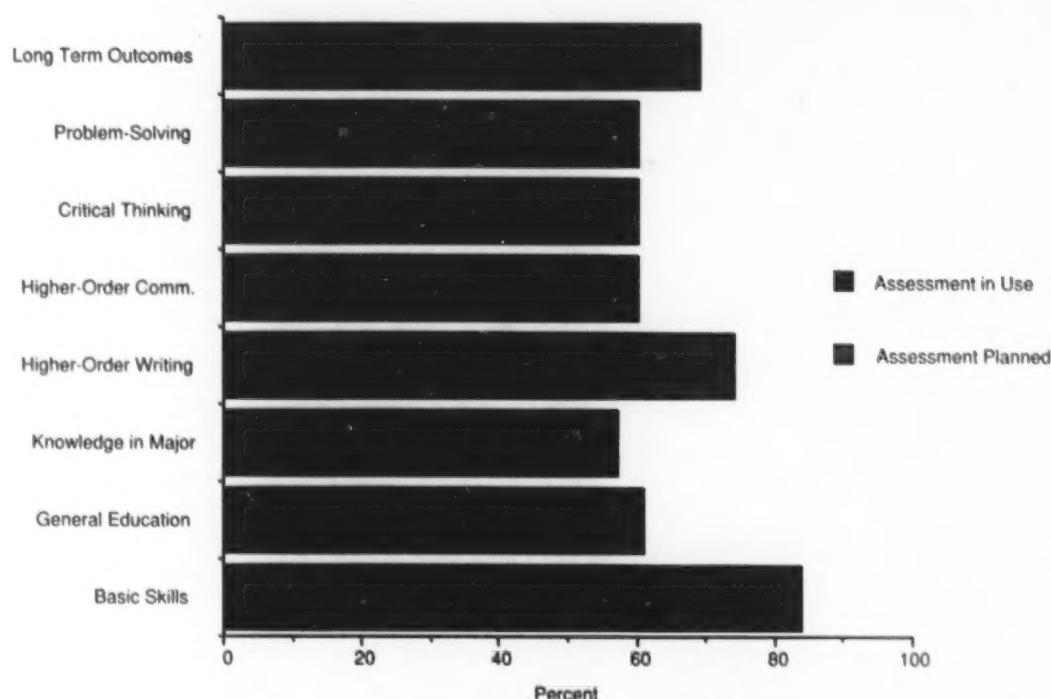
- Over half (54 percent) of two-year colleges anticipate that the priority given to the assessment of student-learning outcomes will increase in the next three to five years.
- Roughly half (47 percent) of institutions report that they assess students' writing abilities. Again, this varies among different types of institutions—greater proportions of two-year, baccalaureate and comprehensive schools are doing so than are doctoral-level institutions.
- One-quarter of all colleges and universities say they test student learning in general education subjects. About 9 percent of doctoral institutions are doing so, compared to 24 percent for two-year, 29 percent for baccalaureate, and 28 percent for comprehensive institutions.
- About a quarter of institutions report assessing student knowledge in a major. Four-year public colleges (31 percent) and comprehensive institutions (33 percent) are more likely to do so than doctoral-level institutions (21 percent) or independent institutions (23 percent).
- One-fifth or fewer institutions are measuring skills in critical thinking, quantitative problem-solving, or oral communication; baccalaureate colleges are the most likely to do so. However, nearly half of institutions are planning assessments directed to critical thinking skills.
- One-third or fewer institutions are using student outcomes measures such as the percentage of students going on for further education, job placement rates, on-the-job performance, or alumni ratings of the institution. However, two-year colleges make greater-than-average use of these measures: Forty-four percent monitor their graduates' job placement rates and forty-three percent use graduate ratings. In the next three to five years, two-year colleges expect that outcome measures such as percent of students completing their intended program, percent finding employment in their field of study, and employer satisfaction with graduates will be of most importance.
- One-quarter of all colleges and universities are assessing long-term outcomes of graduates. Close to half of institutions are planning to undertake assessment in this area.

Assessment Methods and Procedures

Colleges are making use of a variety of methods and instruments to assess student learning and other outcomes.

- Almost one-third seek evidence of demonstrated proficiency through a student performance or portfolio evaluation.
- Almost one-quarter use pre- and post-tests tied to individual courses. Two-year colleges are the most frequent users (32 percent) of these tests.

Figure 2
Areas of Student Learning Assessed at Colleges and Universities, 1989



Source: American Council on Education, 1989

- Some 26 percent of all colleges and universities use locally developed tests other than course exams.
- Standardized tests such as ACTs and SATs are used by 28 percent and 26 percent, respectively, of institutions. Twenty-six percent use other nationally standardized test instruments. ASSET is commonly used in two-year colleges.
- Seventeen percent report using the ACT College Outcome Measures Program (COMP), a group of assessment instruments that assess general knowledge and skills derived from a general education program.
- Only 14 percent of all institutions (24 percent of public four-year institutions) administer minimum competency or "rising junior" tests to their students.
- Graduate Record Exams (GREs) are used by 12 percent of all institutions, including 34 percent of comprehensive universities and 28 percent of doctoral universities.

Assessment Focuses on Entry-Level Skills, Not Outcomes

The assessment "movement" notwithstanding, assessment on many campuses remains largely in the traditional domain of placement testing. Both ACE findings and a recent survey of large research universities³ suggest that many assessment activities focus on attainment of entry-level skills using, for instance, standardized tests such as the SAT or ACT, or competency exams in writing, foreign language, and basic skills. At two-year colleges, student learning skills assessments also generally take place upon entry and focus on basic skills.

The use of outcome measures to assess academic or personal growth during the college experience is much less frequent. Relatively few institutions require a demonstration of mastery of general knowledge, knowledge in one's major, or attainment of higher-order skills. Even scarcer are measures of personal development that track changes in student values or attitudes. However, a substantial number of institutions reported in *Campus Trends* that they are moving toward such outcomes data. In the two-year college survey, institutions were asked to identify which of six "process skills" they assessed, including such areas as critical thinking and self-understanding. Between seven to eighteen percent of these institutions reported assessing one or more of these skill areas.

How Are Assessment Results Being Used?

Educators are right to be concerned as to whether or not the recent flurry of assessment activities has generated more heat than light. To date, about three-quarters of *Campus Trends* respondents have made some use of

assessment information. Community colleges and public four-year institutions have made the heaviest use of such data.

How are the results of campus assessments being used? When queried, campus administrators report such data are mainly being used for internal purposes—incorporated in program and curriculum planning and review or reported to internal constituencies, such as faculty and students (figure 3).

Of those institutions that have made use of assessment information:

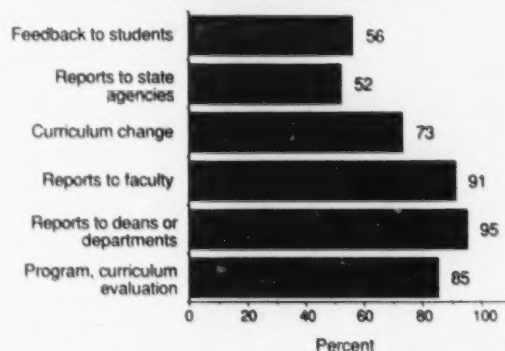
- In 1990, 85 percent use the results for program and curriculum evaluation.
- Almost three out of four have made changes in the curriculum on the basis of assessment information.
- In two-year institutions, three out of four use the results for institutional planning.
- Fifty-six percent provide feedback in some form to students. Ninety percent have reported results to faculty and administrators.

More than half of the institutions using assessment results have reported them to state boards or agencies. Community colleges and public four-year institutions are the most likely to use assessment data this way; however, even among these institutions internal use of assessment information is more prevalent.

A recent study of two-year colleges makes an important distinction between those institutions that assessed certain outcomes and those that both assessed outcomes and used that information to assess institutional effectiveness. Nearly half (46 percent) of two-year institutions indicated that they do not use any student learning outcomes measures for the purpose of assessing institutional effectiveness.

The two-year college study also found that institutions that have a coordinator(s) for institutional effectiveness and student outcome assessment actually use twice as many measures as those with no coordinator or only a coordinator for institutional effectiveness.

Figure 3
How Assessment Results Are Used, 1990



Source: American Council on Education, 1990

Table 1
Comparison of 1988 and 1990 Survey Responses on Assessment

(Percentage Agreeing with Each Statement)

	Total	2-year	Bacca- laureate	Compre- hensive	Doc- toral	Public 2-year	Public 4-year	All Inde- pendent
1988								
Our institution currently has assessment activities underway	55	61	42	61	42	66	64	42
Our state is requiring assessment procedures	29	33	17	36	29	43	43	11
<u>Uses of results among those that obtained them:</u>								
• Reports to state boards or agencies	26	27	21	30	23	38	32	14
• Reports to deans, department chairs	40	43	38	36	30	55	46	25
• Reports to faculty	41	46	36	35	29	54	39	31
• Feedback to students	38	44	32	32	22	53	37	26
• Program or curriculum evaluation	44	53	32	41	30	56	43	36
• Curriculum changes	40	51	30	32	19	57	37	29
<u>Attitudes on student assessment:</u>								
Most campus officials have strong fears about the misuse of effectiveness measures by external agencies	78	75	81	79	84	77	83	77
Use of nationally standardized tests for purposes of student assessment risks distorting the educational process	62	51	76	67	81	49	70	69
1990								
Our institution currently has assessment activities underway	82	88	76	83	68	87	79	79
Our state is requiring assessment procedures	42	50	28	47	45	53	55	25
<u>Uses of results among those that obtained them:</u>								
• Reports to state boards or agencies	52	57	42	51	66	65	69	28
• Reports to deans, department chairs	95	99	92	88	96	99	95	90
• Reports to faculty	91	96	96	74	70	96	85	89
• Feedback to students	56	62	51	46	51	63	47	52
• Program or curriculum evaluation	85	85	96	72	82	84	83	88
• Curriculum changes	73	83	67	53	67	82	66	66
<u>Attitudes on student assessment:</u>								
Most campus officials have strong fears about the misuse of effectiveness measures by external agencies	73	71	71	81	79	74	72	73
Use of nationally standardized tests for purposes of student assessment risks distorting the educational process	70	63	78	68	77	63	66	78

IMPLICATIONS

Many, if not most, institutions have come aboard the assessment wagon. All but nine states now have requirements for some form of assessment by public institutions. The level of activity in the field is amply demonstrated by a flurry of new publications and four national conferences devoted to assessment issues that have drawn a substantial number of participants.

In two-year colleges, many institutions expect assessment programs to be given high priority in the next three to five years. A recent report states, "(while) there is considerable diversity in where we are now with respect to using student outcome measures to assess institutional effectiveness. . . there is little disagreement with where we want to be in the very near future."⁴ Fully 54 percent of two-year institutions anticipate a greater emphasis on using student learning skills measures to assess institutional effectiveness.

Colleges seek to fit assessment to both internal needs and the demands of external constituencies in an attempt to satisfy the dual goals of improved teaching and learning, and, greater public accountability. With regard to the latter goal, administrators' attitudes suggest that serious impediments to the adoption of assessment procedures still remain.

Although some of the initial fear and hostility regarding the accountability movement has abated, administrators' concerns reflect a persisting confusion about who oversees assessment and what the legitimate uses of assessment results might be. Both faculty and administrators fear that assessment results will be used against them instead of being used in a positive sense as tools to improve performance. These are issues that need discussion at the campus level and that institutions and state boards must resolve together.

In addition to a plethora of state mandates, campuses have accrediting agencies to answer to. The U.S. Department of Education issued regulations effective September 1988 that require all accrediting bodies to seek outcomes information from institutions. There are certain to be new pressures on campuses from this source.

State governments are likely to increase their emphasis on assessment as a result of recommendations in a recently issued report from the National Governors' Association. In that report, a strong call for accountability from the educational system was issued. The governors state that the educational system must be performance-oriented and it must be accountable, with "real rewards for high performance and significant consequences for failure." Specifically touching upon higher education, the report urges states to have public post-secondary institutions "define what students should learn and hold institutions accountable for the results." In the area of teacher education programs, the report recommends that states take immediate steps to turn around inadequate programs and terminate them if the institution fails to take corrective action.⁵

Further, both the National Governors' Association and Congress are working towards the establishment of a national group to monitor the achievement of national educational goals. Colleges and universities may well express concern about how progress in higher education will be assessed and what measures will be used.

New or expanded assessment activity on campus will demand resources—to implement programs and to take corrective action. As the study of two-year institutions reported, those with both a coordinator for institutional effectiveness and a coordinator for student outcome assessment actually use more assessment data. If, for instance, the focus within an institution or a state system is on entry-level assessment, more funds and resources will likely be devoted to remediation on those campuses.

In order for assessment of student learning outcomes to become accepted by faculty, they must be involved in the development of appropriate measures and they must recognize the benefits of using the assessment method. To encourage faculty to become fully involved, the reward structure must acknowledge their assessment efforts.

In 1990, almost half (47 percent) of college administrators cite "program quality" as one of the most important challenges facing the institution in the coming years (*Campus Trends*, 1990). If this is the case, then, concern about quality will continue to motivate assessment activities on college campuses and increase the pressure to use assessment results to make demonstrable improvements in both teaching and learning.

NOTES

1. Diane F. Halpern, ed. *Student Outcomes Assessment: What Institutions Stand to Gain* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987), 3.
2. Conversation with Pat Hutchings, American Association for Higher Education, October 1989.
3. John C. Ory and Stephanie A. Parker, "Assessment Activities at Large, Research Universities," *Research in Higher Education* (August 1989): 379.
4. Susan Cooper Cowart, *A Survey on Using Student Outcomes Measures to Assess Institutional Effectiveness: Final Report: 1988 Survey of AACJC Institutions* (American College Testing Program, 1990), 54.
5. National Governors' Association, *Educating America: State Strategies for Achieving the National Education Goals: Report of the Task Force on Education* (Washington, D.C.: National Governors' Association, 1990), 8, 25.

RESOURCES

American Association for Higher Education Assessment Forum. Convenes an annual conference, commissions and publishes papers, and provides a national directory of assessment programs and projects. For more information, contact Barbara Wright, Forum director, at One Dupont Circle, Suite 600, Washington, D.C. 20036, (202) 293-6440.

"Assessment Update: Progress, Trends, and Practices in Higher Education," quarterly newsletter edited by Trudy Banta, director of the Center for Assessment Research and Development, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and published by Jossey-Bass, 350 Sansome St., San Francisco, CA 94101-1310, (415) 433-1767.

Campus Trends is an annual survey of college and university administrators conducted by the American Council on Education. It is designed to provide timely information on current practices in American higher education and focuses on variables such as: enrollment and finances, faculty, curriculum, institutional status, student assessment, and challenges of the future. *Campus Trends*, 1990 is available for \$10 for ACE members and \$13 for nonmembers (earlier issues are \$5 for members and \$8 for nonmembers) from ACE, Division of Policy Analysis and Research, One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036, (202) 939-9450.

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